Asean and the UN: Natural partners

Both have mutually supportive roles in promoting global peace and a rules-based international order

By Invitation

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For The Straits Times

The United Nations and Asean are natural partners. This is reflected in the charters of both organisations. In the case of the UN, Article 23 of its charter makes references to the role of regional organisations and agencies in the maintenance of international peace and security. As for Asean, Article 2(3) of its charter commits Asean and its members to uphold the UN charter.

HISTORY

Asean’s relations with the UN began in the early 1970s through the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the development arm of the world body. The UNDP sponsored a two-year study to assist Asean in conceptualising its economic cooperation activities. As Asean began to make enormous progress in its economic development and rose to become a significant player in the international system, the relationship was transformed. The UN was no longer represented by the UNDP but by its secretary-general.

SUMMITS AND MINISTERIAL MEETINGS

The first Asean-UN Summit was held in 2000 in Bangkok, laying the foundation for a growing network of stronger linkages and diverse areas of cooperation in the years to come.

The second summit was held in 2007 at the UN headquarters, in New York. It was attended by the UN secretary-general and the heads of the various UN bodies.

In 2017, a memorandum of understanding between Asean and the UN was signed in New York, establishing a partnership for cooperation in many fields.

The third Asean-UN Summit was held in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2020. At the meeting, the leaders reaffirmed their commitments to working more closely in addressing issues of common concern such as the global financial crisis, climate change and disaster management.

Asean-UN cooperation was reinforced at their fourth summit in 2021 in Bali, during which the leaders adopted the Joint Declaration of the Comprehensive Partnership between Asean and the UN. Areas of cooperation include maintaining and promoting regional peace, security and development.

Subsequent years saw summits being held in Brunei (2013), Naypyidaw in Myanmar (2014) and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2015). The fourth summit was held in 2016 in Vientiane, Laos. At that meeting, the leaders approved a plan of action for the period 2016 to 2020 to implement the comprehensive partnership, implementation of the plan is under way, especially following the institutionalisation of the secretariat-to-secretariat mechanism last year.

In addition to the summits, there is an annual meeting between the Asean foreign ministers, the president of the UN General Assembly and the UN secretary-general during the high-level week in New York. This annual meeting is both substantive and symbolic. It reflects the close partnership between Asean and the UN as well as the high comfort level among their leaders.

STILLS & MINISTERIAL MEETINGS

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Asean’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Burhan Gafoor noted that the relationship between Asean and the UN is a mutually reinforcing one. The UN provides the multilateral rules-based framework that allows regional organisations like Asean to function effectively. At the same time, Asean contributes to global peace and security by strengthening habits of cooperation and respect for international law at the regional level.

In 2008, Myanmar was hit by a killer cyclone called Nargis. It killed 140,000 people, destroyed 700,000 homes and devastated the paddies fields of the productive Irrawaddy delta. Myanmar faced a major humanitarian crisis. At first, the government was unwilling to open its doors to foreign assistance, fearing that certain Western governments would take advantage of the crisis to interfere and change its regime. Asean assured Myanmar that this would not happen.

In the end, Myanmar agreed to accept international assistance, under the framework of the Asean-Myanmar UN Tripartite Core Group. The cooperation between Asean and the UN in helping Myanmar to recover from the destruction of Cyclone Nargis was a success story.

Asean has contributed to global peace and security by strengthening habits of cooperation and respect for international law at the regional level.

In conclusion, I wish to quote to the words of Singapore’s Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan: “The UN is a vital pillar of our global order, and we should do all we can to support it.”

As Asean and the UN have been, and will continue to be, natural partners.